

Oral Histories

Students listen to the testimonies of Jews from Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Morocco, learn to read oral history the way historians do, and honor each speaker with an evidence based acrostic poem

GRADE AND SETTING

Grades 6 to 8: public, independent, and Jewish schools; adaptable for grades 9 to 12

TIME

Two 45 minute class periods

APPENDICES

A: Listening Guide
B: Acrostic Poems
C: Context Cards
D: Student Interview Guide

Overview

Oral history is the collection and study of information about the past from the spoken memories of people who lived through it. Since 2010, JIMENA's Oral History Program has recorded the testimonies of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, preserving memories of family life, language, food, music, holidays, and relationships with neighbors, as well as experiences of persecution, displacement, and rebuilding in new countries. In this lesson, students work as historians. Each group listens to one testimony from Libya, Egypt, Yemen, or Morocco, records evidence, asks who is speaking and why, and checks the story against historical context. Groups then compare all four communities and write an acrostic poem in which every line is grounded in what the speaker said.

Essential Questions

1. What can we learn from the personal stories of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa that we cannot learn from a textbook?
2. How can we describe Jewish life in these communities, and why did most of these communities leave?
3. Why is oral history important, and what are its limits as a historical source?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Explain what oral history is and how it differs from written records.
2. Listen closely to a testimony and record specific evidence with minute marks.
3. Source a testimony by identifying who is speaking, when, to what audience, and for what purpose.
4. Corroborate a testimony with historical context and compare the experiences of four Jewish communities.
5. Write an acrostic poem in which every line is supported by evidence from a testimony.

Curriculum Connections

- **Social Studies (C3 Framework):** D2.His.4.6-8 (analyze factors that shaped people's perspectives); D2.His.10.6-8 (detect limitations in the historical record); D2.His.16.6-8 (organize evidence into an argument about the past).
- **English Language Arts (Common Core):** RH.6-8.1 and RH.6-8.2 (cite evidence and determine central ideas of a source); SL.8.2 (analyze the purpose of information presented in media); SL.6.1 through SL.8.1 (collaborative discussion).
- **Jewish Studies (Jewish settings):** Pirkei Avot 1:1 and the chain of tradition; Torah she'be'al peh, the Oral Torah; Sephardic and Mizrahi heritage.

Key Vocabulary

- **Oral history:** history gathered by recording the spoken memories of people who lived through events.
- **Testimony:** a person's recorded account of what they experienced.
- **Primary source:** a source created by someone who experienced an event or time firsthand.
- **Sourcing:** asking who created a source, when, for what audience, and why.
- **Corroboration:** checking a source against other evidence to see where it agrees or differs.
- **Mizrahi:** describing Jews whose families come from the Middle East and North Africa (from the Hebrew *mizrah*, "east").
- **Sephardic:** describing Jews whose families trace their roots to Spain and Portugal; many settled in North Africa and the Ottoman Empire. The two terms often overlap.
- **Refugee:** a person forced to leave their country because of persecution, war, or danger.
- **Aliyah:** immigration of Jews to the Land of Israel (literally "going up").
- **Acrostic:** a poem in which the first letters of the lines spell a word or name.
- **Be'al peh** (בְּעַל פֶּה): "by heart," literally "on the mouth"; knowledge passed on orally.

Teacher Background

Jewish communities lived across the Middle East and North Africa for more than two thousand years. Between the 1940s and the 1970s, roughly 850,000 Jews left or were forced out of Arab countries and Iran, driven by anti-Jewish violence, discriminatory laws, the loss of citizenship and property, and the upheavals that followed the creation of the State of Israel. Most resettled in Israel; others rebuilt their lives in France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and elsewhere. Because many families left quickly and the communities they left no longer exist, the memories of the people who lived there are among the richest sources for this history.

JIMENA launched its Oral History Program in 2010, guided by the testimony methods of the USC Shoah Foundation. Interviews cover Jewish life in the country of origin, the story of leaving, and rebuilding in a new home. The four testimonies in this lesson represent four different communities and four different journeys. Appendix C gives a context card for each speaker. One video, Gina Waldman's, is a public talk she gave at a 2013 Lehrhaus Judaica conference rather than a recorded interview. This difference is useful: it lets students ask how the setting and audience of a source shape what a speaker chooses to share.

Oral histories are powerful and imperfect. They capture daily life, feelings, and voices that official records leave out, but they are told years after the events, from one person's point of view, and memory can blur or change. Historians do not reject oral history for this reason; they source it and corroborate it, just as they do with written documents.

Materials

- Computers or tablets with headphones for each group, or a projector and speakers to watch together
- The four testimony videos (links below and in Appendix C)
- Handouts:
- [Appendix A: Listening Guide](#) (one per student)
- [Appendix B: Acrostic Poems](#) (one per student)
- [Appendix C: Context Cards](#) (one card per group)
- [Appendix D: Student Interview Guide](#) (optional, for the extension)

The four testimonies

- [Gina Waldman, Libya](#) (8 min). Talk at a Lehrhaus Judaica conference, 2013
- [Mark Levy, Egypt](#) (6.5 min). JIMENA Oral History, 2015
- [Margalit Oved, Aden, Yemen](#) (5.5 min). JIMENA Oral History, 2011
- [Jacques Dahan, Morocco](#) (6 min). JIMENA Oral History, 2012

Note to teacher: Preview all four videos before class. The speakers describe warm memories of home as well as anti-Jewish violence and the fear of leaving; the content is appropriate for middle school, but students should know in advance that some stories are painful. Turn on captions to support listening. If devices are limited, watch the four testimonies together as a class and assign each group one speaker to track.

Procedures

Day 1. Introduction (15 minutes)

- 1 Main questions (2 min).** Write the essential questions on the board. Students will return to them at the end of Day 2.
- 2 What is history? (3 min).** Students write a one sentence answer, then share. Note common ideas on the board.
- 3 How do we know what happened? (5 min).** Ask: Do you know a story about yourself as a baby? Students share it with a partner. Then ask: How do you know it happened, if you were too young to remember? Guide students to see that someone told, or transmitted, the story to them.
- 4 Chains of memory (5 min). Choose one option.** *In Jewish settings:* read Pirkei Avot 1:1: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, the elders to the prophets, and the prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly." Ask: Why does the text list a chain of names? What advice did the Men of the Great Assembly give (be careful in judgment, raise many students, make a fence around the Torah)? What is your link in the chain? *In public school settings:* discuss how communities around the world, from West African griots to Indigenous nations of the Americas to families at a holiday table, pass history on by voice. Ask: What is gained when a story is told aloud? What can change?

Day 1. Body of the Lesson (30 minutes)

- 5 Oral history as a source (5 min).** Explain that historians interview people who lived through events, and a recorded testimony becomes a primary source. With the class, build a two column chart. *Strengths:* daily life, feelings, languages, food, relationships with neighbors, voices missing from official records. *Limits:* told years later, one person's point of view, memory can blur, and the setting and audience shape what is shared. Historians handle these limits by **sourcing** and **corroborating**.
- 6 Listening to our elders (2 min).** Read aloud: "Today we will hear the stories of Jews who grew up in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Morocco. For thousands of years, communities around the world, including Jewish communities, have passed on history, law, and values by word of mouth. In Jewish tradition, teachings handed down orally before they were written are called the Oral Torah, learned *be'al peh*, 'on the mouth.' Sephardic and Mizrahi rabbis passed on commentaries, legal rulings, stories, and proverbs this way for generations. Your job today is to listen like historians: to learn what life was like in these communities, what languages people spoke, how Jews lived with their neighbors, how they celebrated, and why they left."
- 7 Expert groups (5 min).** Divide the class into four groups and give each group one context card from Appendix C. Hand out Appendix A. Groups read their card and complete Part 1 of the Listening Guide.
- 8 Watch and record (12 min).** Groups watch their testimony once straight through, then a second time, pausing to record evidence in Part 2 of Appendix A with the minute mark for each detail. Not every question will be answered in every video; students mark those "not mentioned."
- 9 Think like a historian (6 min).** Groups complete Part 3 of Appendix A together and agree on the three most important things their classmates should know about their speaker.

Day 2. Comparing Communities (15 minutes)

- 10 Jigsaw.** Form new groups of four with one expert from each testimony. Each expert has two minutes to share their speaker's story and evidence. Groups complete the comparison chart in Part 4 of Appendix A, then identify one experience all four speakers shared and one important difference.
- 11 Discuss.** Return to the essential questions. Ask: What can these stories teach us that a textbook cannot? Why might two people from the same country remember things differently? What would we lose if these stories had never been recorded?

Day 2. Conclusion: Honoring the Speakers (30 minutes)

- 12 The acrostic tradition (5 min).** Hand out Appendix B. Explain that Jewish writers have used acrostics for thousands of years: Psalm 145 and the poem "A Woman of Valor" (Proverbs 31) follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet, and Rabbi Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz, a sixteenth century poet born in Thessaloniki who lived in Safed, signed his name in the first letters of the verses of "Lecha Dodi." Writing a person's name into a poem is a way to honor them. Review the two model poems.
- 13 Write (15 min).** Students write an acrostic of their speaker's first name, individually or in pairs. Every line must include a specific detail from the testimony, recorded with its minute mark in the planning column. Younger students may write one word per line; advanced students may use the speaker's full name.
- 14 Share and reflect (10 min).** Students read their poems aloud or post them for a gallery walk. Exit ticket: Name one thing a testimony taught you that a textbook could not, and one limit of oral history you noticed today.

Assessment

- **Formative:** evidence and minute marks in Appendix A, Part 3 sourcing responses, and contributions to the jigsaw discussion.

- **Summative:** the acrostic poem and exit ticket. A strong poem is accurate (every line is supported by the testimony), specific (names places, people, foods, traditions, or events rather than general feelings), and respectful of the speaker's experience. A strong exit ticket names both a strength and a limit of oral history.

Differentiation

- **Younger students or English learners:** turn on captions; provide minute marks for key moments; allow one word acrostic lines; offer sentence frames ("In this testimony, ___ remembers ___").
- **Students who need support:** pair students in the expert group; assign two or three questions from Part 2 rather than all eight; replay key sections.
- **Advanced learners:** compare two testimonies from the same country in JIMENA's Oral History collection (for example, the three parts of Jacques Dahan's testimony), or research one event a speaker mentions and write a paragraph explaining where the testimony and the historical record agree or differ.

Extension Activities

- **Record an oral history.** Using Appendix D, students interview an older relative, neighbor, or family friend about their childhood, traditions, and any move to a new place. Students write a summary and, with the narrator's permission, share it with the class. Families may share their own stories with JIMENA through [Share Your Story](#).
- **Explore the collection.** Students choose a testimony from another country in [JIMENA's Oral History collection](#) or watch [Daniel Khazzom, Jewish Life in Iraq](#), and present how it compares with the four testimonies from class.
- **Class exhibit or mural.** Students illustrate scenes from the testimonies alongside their acrostic poems and the evidence behind each line. Connect to JIMENA's [All-Inclusive Heritage Museum](#) lesson.
- **Questions for the speakers.** Students write letters with follow up questions they would ask their speaker, and discuss what kinds of questions oral historians ask and why.

Resources and External Links

- [Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit \(JIMENA\)](#)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/
- [Jewish Language Project: Beyond the Family Tree, with family interviews \(Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit\)](#)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/jewish-language-project/
- [Jewish History \(Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit\)](#)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/recommendation/jewish-history/
- [JIMENA Oral History Program](#)
qua.jimena.org/oral-history
- [JIMENA Oral History: All Stories, by country](#)
qua.jimena.org/oral-history/stories
- [JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Morocco, and more](#)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage
- [Gina Waldman: Born in Libya, fled to Italy, immigrated to San Francisco \(Lehrhaus Judaica\)](#)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOWcf1C6DvQ
- [Mark Levy: Journeys of a Sephardic and Mizrahi Family \(JIMENA, 2015\)](#)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4yjBGUASO4
- [Margalit Oved: Jewish Life in Aden \(JIMENA, 2011\)](#)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=3w0Irek2VBE

- [Jacques Dahan: Revisiting Jewish Life in Morocco's Atlas Mountains \(JIMENA, 2012\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3w0Irek2VBE)
vimeo.com/55552697
- [Daniel Khazzom: Jewish Life in Iraq \(JIMENA, 2010\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZkmPfHVT7Q)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZkmPfHVT7Q
- [Seeing the Voices: National Project Documenting the Heritage of Jews from Arab Countries and Iran \(ANU Museum\)](http://stv.anumuseum.org.il/en/)
stv.anumuseum.org.il/en/
- [The Forgotten Exodus podcast \(American Jewish Committee\)](http://www.ajc.org/forgotten-exodus)
www.ajc.org/forgotten-exodus
- [Living Legends: Oral History Projects Bring Core Subjects to Life \(Edutopia\)](http://www.edutopia.org/living-legends-oral-history-projects-bring-core-subjects-to-life)
www.edutopia.org/living-legends-oral-history-projects-bring-core-subjects-to-life
- [Principles and Best Practices for Oral History \(Oral History Association\)](http://oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/)
oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/